

**Testimony of
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**At the Hearing of the
House International Relations Committee
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and
International Operations**

**“In Defense of Human Dignity: The 2005 International
Religious Freedom Report”**

November 15, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee: It is an honor to be here today before the Committee and I want to begin by thanking you for holding this hearing and for giving me the opportunity to discuss the recent work of the State Department on religious freedom.

It has been my great pleasure to work with this Committee over the past several years, and I am very grateful for the Committee's commitment to religious freedom, for the support you give to our efforts, and for the advocacy each of you do in your own right.

We recently submitted to the Congress our seventh *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom*, and I appreciate this opportunity to formally present the report findings to the Committee. This report demonstrates our nation's commitment to the ideal of religious freedom and our compassion for those who are deprived of it.

Religious freedom has always been central to American life and public policy. It is the first of the freedoms enumerated in our Bill of Rights – a reflection of the Founders' belief that freedom of religion and conscience is the cornerstone of liberty. For nearly four centuries now, millions have come to our shores seeking the freedom to worship according to the dictates of their own conscience. Religious liberty has been an essential ingredient in the American experiment in self-government. Americans have always drawn great strength from the free exercise of their religion and from the diverse faith communities that flourish in our nation. As President Bush said earlier this year, "Our Founding Fathers knew the importance of freedom of religion to a stable and lasting Union. Our Constitution protects individuals' rights to worship as they choose.... We reject religious bigotry in every form, striving for a society that honors the life and faith of every person. As we

maintain the vitality of a pluralistic society, we work to ensure equal treatment of faith-based organizations and people of faith.”

Religious Freedom and the Dignity of the Human Person

Religious freedom is at the core of human dignity – the notion that every human being possesses an inherent and inviolable worth that transcends the authority of the State. Religious freedom is a cornerstone of all other human rights in the sense that it touches the most intimate sphere of the human spirit. It is an essential ingredient for the flourishing of the individual and of the whole of society. The spiritual longings of the human heart have an innate dignity all their own. These longings deserve our respect and demand our protection. Every violation of religious freedom, whether open or hidden, does fundamental damage to the individual and to the larger society. The International Religious Freedom Report seeks to shine light on these violations and, in so doing, serves as an important bulwark in the defense of human dignity.

Religious freedom contributes decisively to producing a free and just society. The protection of the inherent and inviolable right of every human being to pursue ultimate truth and to believe and worship, or not, helps all individuals to be genuinely free and to gain a fuller understanding of their own inherent dignity. The ability to choose freely one’s beliefs gives meaning to the choice and ennobles the individual. Thus, religious freedom strengthens a society’s moral integrity: it unites its citizens and makes them more respectful and committed to each other and to the common good.

Today there is international recognition that freedom of religion is an inalienable right of all humankind. Both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights contain strong affirmations

of the universality of this right. Religious freedom is indeed a universal right, not confined to any particular nation, culture or faith. It is a right which is not conferred from the outside, but arises from the person's very nature. No external power or government should grant unto itself the authority to constrain or extinguish this right. To cry out against the torture of people because of their religion, to demand the release of those imprisoned because of their religious beliefs, to insist that religious minorities be protected – these are not simply acts on behalf of the oppressed. They are actions to affirm a precious and universal right. It is this aspiration that we seek to serve through the work of our office.

Since the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998, we have made important strides in integrating religious freedom into U.S. foreign policy. President Bush and Secretary Rice strongly believe that promoting religious freedom is as much a national interest as it is a national ideal. Those nations that affirm religious liberty lay a cornerstone for democracy and the rule of law. Those governments that respect the rights of their own citizens are those most likely to respect the rights of their neighbors. It is no accident that radical movements most frequently gain strength and recruits under authoritarian regimes that restrict freedom of conscience and belief. As President Bush has said, “the best antidote to radicalism and terror is the tolerance and hope kindled in free societies.”

For all of our efforts, considerable challenges remain. Too many people continue to suffer for the belief or practice of their faith. Too many governments, despite having pledged to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, still refuse to honor this right. Religious freedom may be a reality for some, but for many others it remains illusive. The religious freedom report is a signal to both persecutor and persecuted that they are not forgotten.

International Religious Freedom Report

The production of the International Religious Freedom Report is an enormous undertaking, and I'd like to express my profound gratitude for the exemplary work done by the hundreds of employees of the Department of State here and abroad who make the report possible. I would like to commend the officers of the Office of International Religious Freedom, which took over full responsibility for the editing and producing of the report for the first time this year. I would also like to thank my colleagues in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor who provided so much invaluable support. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my colleagues in the Department's regional bureaus and, most importantly, in our embassies and consulates around the world who worked so diligently to collect, report, and verify the information contained in this report.

This year's report covers events and conditions in 197 countries and areas from July 1, 2004 through June 30, 2005. In our Executive Summary we survey different restrictions on religious freedom, highlight countries where religious freedom conditions have improved, and describe U.S. actions to promote international religious freedom.

The annual report is instrumental in our efforts to promote religious freedom as a universal right. The report is a vehicle through which we seek to expose the wide variety of barriers to religious freedom. In some countries, totalitarian or authoritarian regimes strictly control religious belief and practice, imprisoning those who are caught expressing a prohibited faith. In others, governments impose discriminatory policies and laws that intimidate or harass certain religious groups, sometimes causing members of these groups to flee the country. And in still others, governments are negligent in their duty to protect religious minorities or adherents of "unapproved" religions from

discrimination or persecution from local officials or from violence by members of the public. Even some of the most open societies in the world have used restrictive legislation and practices to limit religious expression or to brand minority religions as “cults” or sects.”

Sometimes intolerance has several components, including a religious dimension. Anti-Semitism, for example, touches on both religious discrimination and ethnic discrimination, and it continues to be a problem of great concern to the U.S. Government and to the international community. We continue to monitor and report on anti-Semitism, which is as much a problem in Russia and certain other parts of the former Soviet Union as it is in some countries of Western Europe. In Moscow alone in 2005, as many acts of violence against Jews had been reported in the first four months – by April – as had been reported in all of 2004. Although the Government of Russia was quick to condemn the violence and provide better security to the area near the synagogue where most of the acts took place, we note that anti-Semitism, even among some representatives in the Duma, continued to be a significant concern.

Countries of Particular Concern

In addition to mandating the production of the annual report, the International Religious Freedom Act also requires the Secretary to designate as “Countries of Particular Concern,” or CPCs, any country whose government has engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

The CPC designation is one of a number of tools in our arsenal, and we make every effort to use it in a way that offers the greatest potential to bring about positive change. Therefore, before designating a government as a CPC, we engage in sustained, vigorous and high-level diplomacy with authorities in countries

where we have diplomatic relations, describing to them the religious freedom violations that place them at the threshold of designation, and suggesting specific steps they can take to improve religious freedom and avoid designation. We devote special attention to countries where there are severe violations of religious freedom. This year Secretary Rice found it necessary to re-designate eight CPCs, namely, Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Vietnam. We will continue to encourage these governments to guarantee internationally recognized standards of religious freedom.

In addition, I want to make clear that we are in final CPC negotiations on one or two fronts. We anticipate making an additional CPC announcement in the near future.

Allow me to take a few moments to review the status of religious freedom in CPC countries.

In Burma, the government continues to place severe restrictions on religious freedom in a number of ways, including monitoring or infiltrating religious organizations and discouraging or prohibiting non-Buddhist groups from constructing new places of worship or repairing existing ones. Some religious leaders, including a number of Buddhist monks who promote human rights and political freedom, are imprisoned, and some Christian clergy face arrest and the destruction of their churches. Muslims face considerable discrimination, including travel restrictions and occasional state-orchestrated or tolerated violence.

In China, the government continues to restrict religious practice to government-sanctioned organizations and registered places of worship. Underground Protestant groups, Catholics who recognize the spiritual authority of the Pope, Muslim Uighurs, Tibetan Buddhists and members of groups the government considers to be “cults” continue to experience intimidation,

harassment, detention and reeducation-through-labor camps. In prison, the government abused members of unregistered religious groups like the South China Church for refusing to recant their beliefs. There were also credible reports of deaths in prisons and labor camps due to torture and abuse.

In Eritrea, the government issued a decree in 2002 that effectively prohibited all religious activities outside of four officially recognized groups. The government continues to harass, arrest, and imprison without trial members of Pentecostal and other independent evangelical groups and Jehovah's Witnesses. Some religious prisoners were held in harsh conditions that included placing them in shipping containers in the desert where they were exposed to extreme temperature fluctuations. There were also numerous reports of attempts to force recantations. Diplomatic efforts over the past year to work constructively with the Eritrean government on religious freedom have been unsuccessful. As a result, in September Secretary Rice approved a sanction to deny commercial export to Eritrea of any defense articles and defense services controlled under the Arms Export Control Act, with narrow specified exceptions.

In Iran, members of religious minorities – including Sunni and Sufi Muslims, Baha'is, Jews, and Christians – face imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on their religious beliefs. Baha'is are forbidden from practicing their faith, and the state-controlled media conducted a campaign of defamation against the group. The government has vigilantly enforced its prohibition on proselytizing activities by certain Protestant Christians by closing churches and arresting converts. In September of 2004, security officials arrested 85 leaders of the Assemblies of God Church.

In North Korea, religious freedom is non-existent, and particularly severe violations of religious freedom continue. The

regime continues to repress unauthorized religious groups. In addition, religious persons who proselytized or who had ties to overseas Christian groups operating in China were allegedly subjected to arrest and harsh penalties. Defectors continued to report that the regime arrested and executed members of underground Christian churches in prior years. Over the years, defectors have asserted that Christians were imprisoned and tortured for reading the Bible and talking about God. These reports are difficult to confirm because the regime severely limits our access there.

In Saudi Arabia, freedom of religion does not exist and the government rigidly enforces conformity to the state-sanctioned Wahhabi tradition of Sunni Islam. Non-Wahhabi Sunni, Shi'a, and Sufi Muslims face discrimination and sometimes severe restrictions on the practice of their faith. Members of the Shi'a minority are subject to officially sanctioned political and economic discrimination, including limited employment opportunities, little representation in official institutions, and restrictions on the building of mosques and community centers. The Government prohibits public non-Muslim religious activities. Some non-Wahhabi Muslim and non-Muslim worshippers risk arrest, imprisonment, lashing, deportation and, in rare cases, torture for engaging in religious activity that attracts official attention.

In September, Secretary Rice approved a temporary 180-day waiver "to further the purposes of the International Religious Freedom Act," as provided for under that legislation. Senior Saudi officials have recognized the need to improve the climate of religious tolerance, and this waiver will give us time to work with the government to address our concerns. The Secretary has raised our religious freedom concerns with senior Saudi officials and has stressed the importance of continuing to work on this issue. In coming months we will press for the implementation of necessary reforms and improvements, such as improving religious freedom

for non-Muslims, Muslim minorities and Muslims whose practice differs from the state-sanctioned Wahhabi interpretation of Islam.

In Sudan, Islamization has been the objective of the governing party and it continued to attempt to impose “Shari’a” on non-Muslims in some parts of the country. The government continued to place restrictions on and discriminate against non-Muslims, non-Arab Muslims, and Muslims from tribes and groups not affiliated with the ruling party. Applications to build mosques generally were granted; however, the process for applications to build churches has been more difficult, so much so that it appears that the last permit was issued around 1975. Many non-Muslims state they have been treated as second-class citizens and discriminated against in government jobs and contracts. Some Muslims received preferential treatment for government services, such as access to medical care, and preferential treatment in court cases involving Muslims against non-Muslims. We will be watching the actions of the new Government of National Unity to ensure that it fully implements the provisions of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the new constitution, both of which provide specific guarantees for religious freedom for all citizens. We will pay special attention to the provisions in the constitution that state Shari’a is only to be a source of legislation in Northern Sudan, and that non-Muslims in the national capitol of Khartoum will be exempt.

In the case of Vietnam, we are encouraged by a number of positive developments, but remain concerned about continued reports of abuses. Vietnam’s legal framework continues to require religious denominations to be officially sanctioned by the government. Restrictions on the hierarchies and clergy of religious groups remain in place. A number of persons remain in prison or under detention for religious reasons. We are concerned about the lack of universal implementation of the new legislation, particularly in light of reports that local officials have pressured

ethnic minority Protestants to renounce their faith. We are also concerned about the lack of normalized relations between the government and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, the Mennonites, and other groups.

At the same time, our efforts to work with the Government of Vietnam on a wide range of issues of reform are bearing fruit. Over this past year, the Government of Vietnam has taken a number of significant steps to improve religious freedom. We have been particularly encouraged by the promulgation of new laws that have relaxed control of religious activities and the promotion and transfer of clerics. The government has released fourteen prominent prisoners and facilitated the registration and re-opening of a number of Protestant “house churches” that had been closed in 2001. It has also permitted the Northern and Southern Evangelical churches to hold long-awaited congresses.

On May 5 of this year, we concluded an agreement with the Government of Vietnam that addresses important religious freedom concerns. This is the first such agreement ever negotiated or signed under the International Religious Freedom Act. Under the terms of this agreement, the Government of Vietnam will fully implement the new laws on religious activities and render previous contradictory regulations obsolete, instruct local authorities to adhere strictly and completely to the new legislation, facilitate the registration and opening of houses of worship, and continue working with us on the release of prisoners of concern. Vietnam must make additional progress before we can consider removing it from the list of CPCs, and we will continue working with the government to secure further reforms to facilitate greater religious freedom.

Beyond those nations designated as CPCs, we are engaging a number of additional countries on serious violations of religious freedom. For example, the situation in Uzbekistan continues to

involve heavy repression of religious freedom. In the past year the government continued to mistreat Muslim believers that it suspected of extremism. Hundreds of Muslims believers are imprisoned for no other reason than they are outwardly observant of their religious beliefs. The government took important steps in 2004 to address torture and establish police accountability, but serious abuses continued. Unregistered religious groups continued to experience varying degrees of official interference, harassment, and repression, as did congregations of ethnic Uzbek Christians. We are continuing engagement with the government to encourage respect for religious freedom for all groups.

Improvements in religious freedom

On many fronts this has been a good year for religious freedom. I would like to take a few moments to report on some positive developments.

In Iraq, a country whose CPC designation was lifted in 2004, the new constitution, approved overwhelmingly in a national referendum last month, gives every individual the “freedom of thought, conscience and faith.” The critical test will be in the constitution’s implementation and interpretation. In our ongoing dialogue with Iraqi authorities, we will encourage them to implement and interpret the constitution in a manner consistent with Iraq’s international human rights obligations. That said, the constitution establishes a framework for religious liberty by not only explicitly providing for freedom of religion, but by also guaranteeing freedom of assembly, association, conscience and expression. The constitution guarantees the freedom of worship and the protection of places of worship. It also contains a provision stating that Iraq “shall respect its international obligations.” These international obligations include the religious freedom guarantees found in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iraq is a party.

In Turkmenistan, where serious violations of religious freedom persist, we will continue to make clear to the government the need for greater and sustained improvements. That said, there were positive developments. Presidential decrees and amendments to law resulted in the registration of new minority religious groups. We also note the release of a number of prisoners and, just recently, the government conducted a first-ever roundtable with representatives of religious minorities. However, we continue to press hard for genuine reform that reflects authentic regard for religious freedom.

In Pakistan, serious violations of religious freedom persist, and we are working for reform. The government has maintained its public call for religious tolerance and has taken some positive steps, including revising the implementation of the blasphemy laws and Hudood Ordinances that have led to past abuses. The government has also made efforts to curb sectarian violence and end the teaching of religious intolerance through reform of the public education curriculum. We welcome Pakistan's consistent call for an end to religious extremism. We will continue to press the government on the need for further improvements on religious freedom.

In India, while problems remained, we observed a general improvement in respect for religious freedom. During the year the government demonstrated its commitment to a policy of religious inclusion at the highest levels of government and throughout society. It also took steps to address expeditiously the failures of the Gujarat State government to halt the Hindu-Muslim riots that occurred there in 2002. The government refused to approve the Gujarat Control of Organized Crime Act, passed by the Gujarat legislature in June 2004, which Muslim groups feared would be used selectively against them. The government also repealed the controversial Prevention of Terrorism Act, which had been

criticized by Muslim groups as a tool used to target them, and replaced it with a law considered to be fairer to minorities. The Government also withdrew controversial school textbooks that espoused a Hindu nationalist agenda and replaced them with more moderate editions. No new states passed anti-conversion laws, and Tamil Nadu repealed its anti-conversion law.

In Georgia, the government took a positive step by passing a law that allows religious groups to register. The government also imprisoned an excommunicated Orthodox priest and several of his associates who were primary instigators of religiously motivated violence.

In Indonesia, the country with the world's largest Muslim population, problems remain. However, it is worth noting that Indonesia has a centuries-long tradition of inter-religious tolerance. President Yudhoyono's administration is committed to promoting religious freedom and is working on a number of initiatives that address religious tensions in the archipelago.

The Middle East continues to be one of our top priorities because of the widespread abuse of religious freedom by some in the region. However, we have noted improved conditions in some countries. In the United Arab Emirates, for example, government officials took the lead in encouraging moderation, showing respect for minority religions, and fostering understanding among religions. On a number of occasions, senior government officials met with representatives of non-Muslim faith groups to discuss religious tolerance, and in June a law was promulgated establishing an Islamic cultural center with the goal of fostering inter-religious tolerance and promoting a better understanding of Islam in the West. In addition, in Qatar, a new constitution which just came into effect explicitly provides for freedom of worship and guarantees the right of association and assembly in accordance with the law.

Conclusion

Promoting religious freedom is central to our nation's role in the world. This commitment leads us to continually expand our efforts. Ensuring greater religious freedom means demanding changes in laws that are oppressive or discriminatory. It means insisting on enforcement of laws that promote religious freedom by government officials. It means devoting energy and resources to promote greater understanding of the importance of this universal value. And it means pressing for the release of religious prisoners, and coming to the aid of victims of abuse. As a central part of President Bush's freedom agenda, all of these efforts are about one thing: making life full and secure for individual people of faith around the world. Eleanor Roosevelt, a great champion of human rights, never lost sight of this focus on the individual. When she was asked where human rights begin, she answered: "In small places, close to home -- so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person...."

There is no right more central to the "world of the individual person" than religious freedom. For all our many differences around this world, each of us holds certain beliefs dear, and we all understand intuitively that we have the right to express them—especially through the practice of our faith. Societies that achieve respect for the freedom of religion defend human dignity and lay a cornerstone for democracy and the rule of law.

Again, we offer sincere thanks to each of you for your commitment to ensuring freedom of thought, conscience, and religion for every individual, in every nation and society around the world. I look forward to continuing to work with you on behalf of religious freedom, and would be pleased to take any questions you may have.